

The Legacies and Potentials of Feminism in Art
de Appel arts centre, Amsterdam: A Case Study

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Abstract

This report is the outcome of a month-long practicum and exploratory study of the history of feminist art at de Appel arts centre, an internationally oriented arts center located in Amsterdam. The result of this study is a documentary film exploring the connections between Feministische Kunst Internationaal (Feminist Art International), a show held at de Appel in the winter of 1978-'79, and *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution* (IICD) Edition III "Masquerade," a rolling curatorial platform working in collaboration with de Appel in the fall of 2008. Data was obtained by means of qualitative methods including participant observation, direct observation and focused interviews, and through intensive historical research utilizing the vast array of materials in de Appel's archive.

De Appel arts centre has been, and continues to be, a center focused on exposing the public to the latest and most contemporary developments in the art world. The choice to host Feministische Kunst Internationaal in 1978 worked to validate feminist art and the contributions of women-artists at a time when the field was overwhelmingly patriarchal, sexist, and inaccessible to women. Thirty years later, "If I Can't Dance...", in collaboration with de Appel, chose to once again revisit and explore the notions of performativity, agency, empowerment, enactment, and gesture that stem from the legacies of the feminist movement. By refusing to focus on static art forms and by incorporating a vast variety of mediums, publications, and discursive events in their exhibitions, de Appel continues to work to facilitate and encourage much-needed further discussion, thinking, and debate about the topics they explore. It is concluded that the themes and issues feminist artists dealt with in the late 1970s, as well as the surrounding theoretical debates about the nature and role of feminism, are all still extremely relevant today. I conclude that it is vital to re-examine the history of feminism, and especially the history of feminist art because of the vast number of relevant ideas and debates that are still unresolved. Perhaps by looking back and examining our history, we can once again begin a discussion about the relevance of feminism and feminist ideas today.

Suggestions for future research include the effectiveness of art as a political tool in the realm of feminism/gender, art as social activism, the degree of public accessibility and knowledge to new developments in the art world, or a study of public reactions to the variety of mediums employed in future editions of "If I Can't Dance...".

Key Words:

Art, feminism, gender, history, identity, sexuality, women

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Introduction/Literature Review:

The 1960s and '70s were a revolutionary time for art in the Netherlands and abroad. According to Marga van Mechelen, author of de Appel: performances/installations/video/projects 1975-1983, “artists were speaking out against the commercialization of art, rejecting the institutions that were committed to it and demanding [its] democratization” with increasing urgency (18). New media, such as performance, installations, and situation, video, and conceptual art, were seen as one such way to make art more democratic and accessible to the broader general public (van Mechelen 19). De Appel Foundation was established in 1975 with the aim of providing a much-needed venue for the showing of various types of new media. At the time, no other such center existed in the Netherlands. De Appel came about solely through the efforts of its founder and first director, Wies Smals, who devoted her time, passion, intellect, as well as most of her own money to develop the concept for de Appel and to organize its first year of programming (van Mechelen 14). It quickly rose to fame, and throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, it earned a reputation as *the* center for European performance art because of its innovative and experimental approach to new media, as well as the diversity of art and artists it attracted.

The rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s led to a growing interest in the role of women artists in the art world and in society. In 1973, art critic Lucy Lippard wrote:

“Before the movement, women were denying their identity, trying to be neutral, and intentionally making art that couldn't be called 'feminine.' When somebody said, 'You paint like a man,' or 'You write like a man,' you were supposed to be happy and you *were* happy, because you knew you were at least making neutral art instead of feminine art- god forbid” (89).

As more female artists entered the field in the mid-1970s, many were increasingly eager to explore notions of feminism in their work. During such a socially dynamic time, it was essentially impossible for artists to ignore the political atmosphere and climate of their respective societies. Feminist artists in particular found conceptual art, in the form of new media (such as video and performance), as an optimal outlet for the kind of social messages they were trying to convey. Conceptual art is defined as “inexpensively written and/or photographed or taped pieces in which the idea is usually more important than the visual object” (Lippard 103). According to van Mechelen, “for various reasons, feminist artists were attracted to the medium of performance. It was a new medium offering possibilities of self-examination and enabling the breaking down of certain role patterns. At the same time it offered a confrontation with the public” (234). De Appel, a center for new media, seemed like an ideal place to host a show exploring new developments in feminist art.

The idea for Feministische Kunst Internationaal (Feminist Art International) came about because Wies Smals was dedicated to showing the most contemporary progressions in art at de Appel, and because, by the mid '70s, “feminist art had become a concept in the international art world” (van Mechelen 242). De Appel, in collaboration with The Women and Visual Art Foundation (SVBK), undertook the task of organizing a program consisting of performances, video screenings, documentary material, and a panel discussion featuring feminist artists for the winter of 1978-'79 (van Mechelen 236). According to the invitation for the event,

“Feminist art distinguishes itself from 'female' art by its more critical and fighting character, as well as its links to the feminist movement. On the one side, feminist art distances itself from the generally accepted opinions about women and the phenomenon of being a woman... it also wants to expose and to reevaluate the neglected female contribution in the existing culture” (1).

In total, *Feministische Kunst Internationaal* featured performances by seven female artists, video screenings by an additional ten, an exhibition featuring photographs and other documentary materials, and, the centerpiece of the show, a panel discussion at the Stedelijk Museum featuring the art historians Lucy Lippard, Callie Rentmeister, and Marlite Halmertsma, and feminist artists Ulrike Rosenbach and Betsy Damon (van Mechelen 236-7). *Feministische Kunst Internationaal* is one of the two biggest international events ever held at de Appel (van Mechelen 234).

The reactions to de Appel's hosting of this show were quite mixed. On the one hand, many women were thrilled about the fact that feminist art had taken a prominent enough position to be featured in an international event at de Appel. By looking at archival photographs from the panel discussion, it is clear that the audience at this event was quite large and enthusiastic. The momentum of the feminist movement at the time was of course a factor in the big turn-out. Many woman-artists, however, reacted very negatively to the organization of *Feministische Kunst Internationaal*. They “saw the attention [feminist art] was being given as imperative, as though [it] was regarded as the norm which every self-respecting woman-artist was supposed to concern herself with and relate to” (van Mechelen 242). Plenty of women-artists at the time were continuing to work without aligning themselves or their work with the agendas of the feminist movement.

Feministische Kunst Internationaal arose out of a very specific combination of circumstances within the social, political, and artistic spheres. The plethora and variety of social movements in the 1970s, the rise and magnitude of the feminist movement at the time, and the dedication of de Appel to the presentation of new media and conceptual art forms allowed this show to take shape. The feminist artists involved in the show showed great hope for the future of feminist art and feminism in general, and the show worked to facilitate much debate about the role of feminist art, its aims, and its potentials. It would be the first, and only, international

feminist art show of such magnitude ever held in the Netherlands.

Almost thirty years later, however, the topic of feminism in art was once again breached by a rolling curatorial platform entitled “If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution.” Developed in 2005 and directed by Frederique Bergholtz and Annie Fletcher, the aim of this platform is to develop projects in collaboration with artists over a longer time frame, and to “generate multiple spaces, contexts and possibilities to look at a specific topic” (If I Can't Dance 3). The first edition of “If I Can't Dance...” was entitled “Feminist Legacies and Potentials in Contemporary Art Practice.” The curators hoped to explore the legacies and potentials of feminism, and to go beyond looking at “feminist art”¹ to discover what these legacies and potentials might be. “If I Can't Dance...” is a unique platform, because the curators make every attempt to present a diverse program including, but not limited to, art in a variety of mediums (installations, photography, video, situation art, etc), performances, discursive events such as reading groups and discussions, and publications. This, in my opinion, is vitally necessary today. In 2006, “If I Can't Dance....” developed a long-term partnership with de Appel arts centre.

On September 28, 2008, “If I Can't Dance...” Edition III 'Masquerade' opened at de Appel. Developed to explore ideas about feminism, identity, and performativity, in this edition of “If I Can't Dance...” the curators wanted to delve into “different modes of masking, mimicry, parody, and assimilation...the construction of subjectivity, modes of formalized or ritualized behavior, codes of contemporary transgressive and normative behavior and the concept of authenticity” using the lens of masquerade (If I Can't Dance 3). 'Masquerade' featured several performances, lectures, and a guided tour in addition to the pieces at de Appel, which included videos, installations, photography, and an archival exhibition. Several of the artists featured

1 I use quotes here because the notion of what exactly “feminist art” is, (and whether it actually exists) is a much-disputed topic at the moment. Can art, for example, be labeled as only “feminist” when it clearly also explores many other social/political/economic/etc. topics? Do feminists automatically produce feminist art?

pulled from multiple forms of media and presentation, and almost all of the artists did a performance or some other sort of discursive event in addition to their piece at de Appel. Like the Feministische Kunst show, 'Masquerade' embraced the chance to confront the viewer with many different mediums and ideas. The result was an extremely robust, varied, and unpredictable show that seemed as if it aimed to leave the viewer with more questions than answers.

I was initially interested in studying the general history and current state of feminist art in the Netherlands. However, when my practicum at de Appel arts centre involved sorting through and cataloguing a variety of archival materials from the Feministische Kunst Internationaal show, I revised my initial question to focus specifically on the history of feminism in art de Appel. After hosting a feminist art show in 1978, feminist ideas were once again being explored at de Appel through “If I Can't Dance...” and *I wanted to explore the connections, similarities, and differences between these two shows with a documentary-style film.*

This paper documents my process of making my final ISP project, a film entitled *Masquerade: Feminism and Art at de Appel arts centre*. I will discuss the assumptions, methodology, and conclusions of my project. I will also delve very briefly into some of the things I found out about the history of feminist art and the history of performance art in Amsterdam.

Assumptions/Methodology:

I gathered the information for my film using interviews, books, articles, participant and personal observation methods, and historical material from de Appel's archive. I chose to present my ISP as a documentary because I think that a project about art can only be truly appreciated if displayed in a visual manner. Not only was the 'Masquerade' exhibition at de

Appel extraordinarily beautiful, but the archival materials that I had access to from Feministische Kunst (especially original photographs) could pretty much speak for themselves. I chose to go beyond simply doing interviews for my film because I had so much amazing external material to pull from, and I thought that using film to visually intertwine the two shows in order to explore the conceptual and theoretical links between them would work especially well. Also, by using film as a medium I was able to present the information I had collected while still leaving the interpretation of this information for the viewer. I will now discuss my experience of making my film, as well as what I discovered along the way.

Before beginning this project, I assumed that “feminist art” in Amsterdam was a thing of the past. I could find no reference to any artists who identified as “feminist,” nor could I find any galleries, shows, or openings that professed to feature feminist themes, artists, or art. I was very interested in why this was, and in where all of the feminist art had gone. I assumed that the feminist artists either did not exist, or had underground networks that were especially difficult to find. I also assumed that this had a great deal to do with the fact that the current social climate of the Netherlands is no longer oriented toward protest, activism, or dissent, as it was in the 1960s and '70s. Finally, I assumed that feminist art in itself was a form of activism because of its oppositional and critical nature. These were assumptions I had accumulated during my short time in the Netherlands and in my own thinking about the idea of feminist art.

As I slowly learned over the course of working on my film, I was incorrect in the majority of my preliminary assumptions. The first, and most important thing that I realized is that it is especially difficult to define what exactly “feminist art” is. Several of my interviewees argued that there is no such thing as “feminist art” because there is no way that art can be *only* feminist in nature. That is, even if a work deals with feminist issues and uses a critical approach, it is incorrect to label it as “feminist art” because it inevitably deals with other social issues *in*

addition to feminism (Donkers). Furthermore, it is also difficult for artist for label her/himself, and she/he often deliberately chooses not to do so. If an artist identifies as a feminist, does that make her/him a feminist artist? Does it make their work feminist art? The answer I got was an overwhelming “no” (Seibold).

Furthermore, I was incorrect in my assumption that artists no longer deal with feminist themes in their art. The exhibition this year at de Appel for “If I Can't Dance...” featured an archival presentation by Stefanie Seibold that clearly drew from ideas of feminism to explore the notion of gesture and masquerade. In fact, many of the featured artists drew from some ideas that had roots in the feminist movement. I quickly discovered that my notion of what “feminist art” was had been extremely poor and narrowly defined. Today there are many artists working with themes that either address feminist topics directly or have roots in the kinds of thinking brought about by the feminist movement. Last year, in 2007, the name of “If I Can't Dance...” was “Feminist Legacies and Potentials in Contemporary Art Practice.” This show not only explicitly explored feminism, but it encouraged artists to develop new works that concerned any of the plethora of ideas brought about by the feminist movement.

The thing I like most about the “If I Can't Dance...” platform is that, by taking several years to explore one topic, it allows for much more flexibility, variety, and ambiguity in the type of work presented. The curators are not attempting to explore every possible avenue of, say, feminism, in a period of several months. Instead, they leave the interpretation of the topic up to the artists and supplement the show with performances, lectures, and other discursive events that encourage public participation and thinking. This, I think, is an extremely effective approach for the time that we live in. I also suspect, but cannot confirm, that it might one of the only effective approaches to exploring feminism in art today. I will further elaborate on this later.

My last incorrect assumption was one that considered all “feminist art” to be

confrontational, oppositional, subversive, and activist in nature. This is overwhelmingly not the case. Just because an artist deals with feminist themes in their work does not automatically mean that they intend for their work to reflect a “feminist agenda” (Seibold). Furthermore, not all work that deals with feminist themes must be confrontational or activist. Many artists today use the legacies of the feminist movement and of feminist thinking to explore the time we live in and their social situations without being pointedly “anti-” anything. Though they may use feminist notions in their art to bring attention to some aspect of their society, this is often with the intent to incite thinking and reflection on the part of the viewer rather than to further some political agenda or aim. The revision of my thinking about these assumptions was crucial for the presentation of my topic in my film.

As previously mentioned, the research for my film involved a variety of methods. I interviewed three people with strong connections to de Appel and “If I Can't Dance...”: Annie Fletcher, one of the curators of the show, Stefanie Seibold, one of the artists featured in the show, and Nell Donkers, the librarian and historian at de Appel. Each of these interviews featured different questions, depending on the subject and their range of knowledge and expertise. I got into contact with all three of my subjects through my practicum at de Appel arts centre. I interviewed Annie because I wanted to know about the thinking behind the format and presentation of art at “If I Can't Dance...”, as well as to gain a professional perspective about the state of art today, and especially about the contemporary explorations of feminism in art. I interviewed Stefanie because I wanted to have an artist's perspective on the same things, and because I wanted to ask her about her work and what she tries to accomplish in it. I was also interested in her opinion about feminism in art today, and how effective art she considers art to be as a form of activism or consciousness raising. The fact that she works with archival material was also very interesting to me, because I wanted to draw connections between a past feminist show

and a current show that deals with some aspects of feminist thinking. Finally, I wanted to interview Nell, my project advisor, because she works as the archivist at de Appel arts centre. She was extremely knowledgeable about the archival materials I was working with to try to reconstruct an idea of Feministische Kunst Internationaal for my film, and I wanted to find out what she knew about de Appel and about Feministische Kunst. Also, I wanted to talk to her to gain a sense of what de Appel is like today, and about what kind of projects they try to host.

Two of my interviews (Stefanie and Nell) were conducted at de Appel, and one (Annie) was conducted at the subject's home in Eindhoven. Each had a semi-structured format but I was very flexible about the topic of discussion. At the time of these interviews, I was still unsure about what exactly the focus of my film was going to be. I initially considered focusing it on the history of de Appel arts centre, on the history of performance as a medium, on several of the artists who attended Feministische Kunst Internationaal, on the history of feminist art in Amsterdam, on the potentials of feminism in art today, and on art as a form of social/political activism. Because of this, I asked my interview subjects a variety of questions to try to gain a broader and more thorough sense of the variety of topics I was initially interested in exploring.

As my initial assumptions began to unravel, I discovered many more potential paths for my film to take. This was extremely frustrating because I found everything so interesting that I was unable to pick a focus on only one topic and reject all of the others. This also made my interviews somewhat less focused than had I been able to choose one topic at the outset of my project. However, considering my complete lack of knowledge about the subject I wanted to explore upon my arrival in the Netherlands, choosing only one focus at the start of my project would have meant that my understanding of the situation surrounding feminism in art in Amsterdam would now be much more limited and constricting.

I also used the method of personal observation, and, to some extent, participant

observation. My practicum allowed me to spend several weeks working at de Appel, and because of this I feel like I gained a much more thorough, though understandably biased, perspective on what it is like to work at such a center. Because of my position as a foreign student, an intern, a volunteer, and because of my limited understanding of Dutch, my position at de Appel was clearly much different than that of the people who actually worked there. However, this allowed me to be included in group dynamics while still maintaining a somewhat objective standpoint.

My practicum also allowed me to volunteer with several of the performances that were part of "If I Can't Dance...". This allowed me to gain a very interesting perspective on the nature of performance art today, as compared to that at the time of Feministische Kunst. During two of the performances by Jon Mikel Euba, a Spanish artist, I was actually a participant, and my job was to photographically document the event and then actually become part of the performance at the end (to the surprise of the audience). I found this to be an extremely valuable and educational opportunity, because it allowed me to gain a sense of not only the kind of people who attend events sponsored by de Appel, but also of their reactions to a performance with no clear meaning or goal. By comparing my experience at these performances with the archival photos of the performances given at Feministische Kunst Internationaal, it seems to me that an audience's reactions to things that they don't understand have changed very little in the past thirty years.

Finally, I did a lot of outside research for my film utilizing books and a variety of archival materials that I came across during my practicum at de Appel. To gain an understanding of what feminist art was and why it came into existence, I read art theory from the 1970s. To find out about Feministische Kunst, the ideas behind it, the artists involved, and the public's reaction to it, I worked my way through boxes of archival materials including old invitations, books, booklets, pamphlets, magazine and newspaper articles, posters, postcards, original photos, correspondence

between the artists and de Appel, artists' resumes, and many other things. These archival materials formed the basis of my film, and they taught me many interesting things about the time that Feministische Kunst happened. This was extremely time-consuming, but I learned more from my practicum than I ever could have learned by just reading about what happened at Feministische Kunst from other sources. Archival materials are an amazing tool for understanding the past, and I am extremely lucky that I had such broad access to de Appel's archive and such unrelenting support and advice from Nell.

As well as using the above-mentioned sources, I also spent a lot of time in the actual "If I Can't Dance..." exhibition at de Appel. Visually documenting this show formed an essential part of my film, because I was able to use the footage I got from this show to paint a picture of the kind of work de Appel has today and to pose a contrast to the kind of work featured at Feministische Kunst. I also attended a guided tour of the exhibition at de Appel given by Frederique Bergholtz, the other curator of the show. Filming this allowed me present information about "If I Can't Dance..." to the viewer from the perspective of both curators, which I found to be extremely effective.

The limitations of my methodology were primarily centered on the short amount of time I had to make this film and gather all of my resources. Because "If I Can't Dance..." was still open to the public for about half of the ISP period, the people involved were extremely busy and hard to get a hold of. Furthermore, I could only do a limited amount of outside research because reading art theory is extremely time-consuming. Considering that fact that I had to finish filming everything I needed in two weeks, it was impossible to do a vast amount of background research at the same time. The actual editing of my film was also overwhelmingly frustrating because I do not feel like I was adequately prepared to do so from the amount of instruction we had received in the "film module." I had to teach myself to use the editing software, which meant

that my film took about a week and a half longer to edit than I had originally anticipated.

Conclusions:

I have drawn several conclusion from my practicum at de Appel arts centre and from working on my film, a few of which have already been mentioned in my introduction, literature review, and methodology. I conclude that Feministische Kunst Internationaal was held at de Appel arts centre at a very specific historical moment that allowed for the merge of conceptual art (through performance etc.) and feminism at an internationally known and important arts venue. The artists who presented work at this show used a variety of mediums, all of which were new and innovative at the time. Video and performance allowed the self-identified feminist artists at this show to explore topics of feminism in a revolutionary way at a revolutionary time. Feministische Kunst also allowed the Dutch public to get a interesting sense of international performance art. This show was a reflection of its time, and the contributions the participating artists made to the fields of both performance and feminism are priceless.

Furthermore, I conclude that “If I Can't Dance...” is a brilliant curatorial platform, and that their approach to the exploration of performance and performativity is both extremely insightful and necessary in the time we live in. By presenting such a varied program, and by allowing the viewer to draw her or his own conclusions, they add many levels to the field and analysis of contemporary art.

My conclusion to my initial research question, the comparison of Feministische Kunst and “If I Can't Dance...” is thoroughly explored in my film. In brief, the themes and issues feminist artists dealt with in the late 1970s, as well as the surrounding theoretical debates about the nature and role of feminism are all still extremely relevant today. I conclude that it is vital to re-examine the history of feminism, and especially the history of feminist art, because of the vast number of relevant ideas and debates that are still left unresolved. Perhaps by looking back and

examining our history, we can once again begin a discussion about the relevance of feminism and feminist ideas today.

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Appendix:Interview Questions (Stefanie Seibold)

- Can you introduce yourself and tell me what you do?
- How long have you been working with de Appel?
- What is your definition of feminism?
- Can you tell me what you know about Feministische Kunst?
 - What were its aims?
 - Why could it happen at the time?
 - Do you think it was successful?
- What is feminist art?
 - Do you consider yourself to be a feminist artist? (Why or why not?)
- Do you consider art to be a form of activism?
- Do you think the need for feminist activism through art still exists?
- Do you think that shows such as “If I Can't Dance...” are the only way to explore topics of feminism in art today? How does this compare to the show in 1978?
- Can you tell me about your work and what you try to accomplish with it?
- Is there anything specific you want people to think about as they are leaving your exhibits?
- What are your future plans?
- What do you think the future of feminism in art is?

Interview Questions (Annie Fletcher)

- Can you introduce yourself?
- Tell me about the concept of “If I Can't Dance...” and how it developed?
- Why did you choose the name “If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your

- Revolution?”
- Episode II was called “Feminist Legacies and Potentials in Contemporary Art Practice.”
What are these legacies, and what are the potentials?
- How did the idea of “Masquerade” develop out of Episode II?
- What is your definition of feminism?
- What was it like to breach the topic of feminism in an art show in 2007? What was the public reaction?
- What sort of reactions do you get to the unusual format of your platform?
- Do you think that art can be used as a political tool?
- Do you feel like art has to compete with other forms of media today? What impact does this have?
- What is the future of feminism in art?

Interview Questions (Nell Donkers)

- Can you tell me a little bit about the history of de Appel? What is your role here today?
- Can you tell me what you know about Feministische Kunst?
- Who was on the panel at this show?
- Can you tell me what you know about the artists who came?
- Can you tell me about Renate Bertlmann's performance?
- Can you tell me about Ulrike Rosenbach's performance?
- Can you tell me about Betsy Damon's performance?
- Do you think this show was effective? What was the public response?
- Do you think such a show would be possible today? Why or why not?
- What is your definition of feminism?
- Do you think that there can be art that is only feminist? Why?

- What is the motto of de Appel today? How does de Appel try to fulfill this motto through the kind of events you choose to have?
- What kind of audience do events at de Appel draw today? (Ages, income, etc?)
- What is the future of art at de Appel?